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Review Articles

THE ENIGMA OF NATIONALISM

By YAEL TAMIR*

Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities,* 2d ed. London: Verso, 1991, 224 pp.

Liah Greenfeld. *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, 571 pp.

Anthony D. Smith. *National Identity.* Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1991, 226 pp.

THE biblical story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) could be interpreted as a mythical description of the origin of nations. According to the story, at this early stage in human history, the world was inhabited by one people who spoke one language until, in their vanity, human beings challenged the limits of their ability and joined together to build a tower reaching up to heaven. Angry and apprehensive about this expansion of human powers, and about the conceit it conveyed, God said:

> Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be withheld from them, which they schemed to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Genesis 11:6–7)

Thus God scattered human beings across the face of the earth, and they divided into nations.

According to this origin myth, the birth of nations is also the beginning of multiplicity and diversity; national experiences are, therefore, particular and universal at the same time. The universal national narrative enfolds itself in many forms; thus there is more than one exodus, one divine redemption, or one moment of liberation for all humankind. Liberation and self-determination are universal experiences, but each nation encounters them its own particular way. This is the essence of the reiterative view of nationalism.[1]

* I am grateful to Batya Stein, Ruti Wintraub, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Dalia Drai for their useful comments and suggestions.

[1] Michael Walzer, "The National Question Revisited" (Tanner Lecture, Oxford, 1989), 40–45.

Most nationalists, however, tend to repress the knowledge that their nation is but a reiteration of a worldwide phenomenon. Ignoring the striking analogies among the processes leading to the creation of different nations, they tend to emphasize the particular. Social scientists, however, do the opposite. They reach beyond particularistic discourses and expose the similarities among different national narratives to produce various typologies of national movements. The authors of the books reviewed here make a significant contribution to the sociology and history of nationalism by exploring the interrelations between the patterns of development of different national movements. Liah Greenfeld, in her interesting book, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, surveys the chronological development of five different national movements, starting with sixteenth-century England, and continuing through mid-seventeenth-century France, Russia during the second half of the eighteenth century, late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Germany, and the United States during the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. The national evolution of these societies, she argues, represents a coherent, though exceedingly complex process. Since these five nations shared the same social space, the mutual influences among them are evident.

The tendency of national movements to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors is also made evident in Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities*. Anderson, wishing to break away from the conceit of European scholars "that everything important in the modern world originated in Europe" (p. xiii), turns our attention to the Americas and provides us with a fascinating account of the development of nationalism in that part of the world. National movements in the Americas, he argues, have shared some features with their European predecessors yet there have been marked differences. First, "language was not an element that differentiated them [Brazil and the United States] from their respective metropolis" (p. 47). Second, unlike European nationalism, which promoted the induction of the lower classes into the political world, in the cases of Venezuela, Mexico, and Peru, it was "the fear of the lower class political mobilization that played a key role in spurring the drive for independence from Madrid" (p. 48).

The riddle, Anderson argues, is "Why was it precisely *creole* communities that developed so early conceptions of the nation-ness—*well before most of Europe?*" (p. 50). The two new chapters included in the second edition attempt to solve the riddle. They demonstrate how three institutions—the census, maps, and museums—shaped the way

in which colonies and the independent states that followed them imagined their domain.

These chapters raise the questions that lie at the heart of *National Identity* by Anthony Smith: How do nations emerge? What holds them together? What accounts for the intensity and scope of national feelings? We cannot begin to understand the power and appeal of nationalism as a political force, Smith argues, "without grounding our analysis in a wider perspective whose focus is national identity treated as a collective phenomenon" (p. vii).

All three authors are fascinated by the mysterious vitality of nationalism. Why does nationalism provide the most compelling identity myth in the modern world? Why and how can it motivate individuals? Why does every successful revolution since World War II define itself in nationalist terms? But before turning to discuss these issues, one must struggle with definitions: What does the term *nation* mean? In what ways is it distinct, if at all, from closely related terms like *state, people,* and *ethnic group.*

An inquiry into the nature of these terms will reveal an irony hovering over the study of nationalism: the more we struggle to provide an adequate definition of nation, and the more we learn about the emergence of nations and about the origins and the development of nationalism, the less credible is the nationalist image of nations as homogeneous, natural, and continuous communities of common fate and descent. Yet, it is precisely this image that nurtures the unique power of nationalism.

Nation: In Search of a Definition

A nation, Anderson argues,

> is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their community. (p. 6)

Anderson carefully distinguishes his definition from Ernest Gellner's claim that nationalism "invents nations where they do not exist."[2] Gellner, he argues, is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretenses that he equates invention with fabrication and falsity rather than with imaging and creation, thus implying that there are true communities that can be advantageously compared to nations.

[2] Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), 169.

Communities, however, are to be distinguished "not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (p. 6).

Anderson's definition is important because it emphasizes the central role played by the *image* of a nation in creating a national reality. Nevertheless, this definition raises two theoretical difficulties that undermine its usefulness. The first and most serious relates to Anderson's use of the term *imagined.* Anderson argues that a nation is an imagined community because it is impossible for all its members to engage in face-to-face contact with all fellow members at all times. Hence, members can only perceive the nation as a whole by referring to the image of it that they have construed in their own minds. But this use of the term seems trivial and uninformative because all human associations, even if no larger than families or primordial villages, could, according to this definition, be considered imagined communities. For instance, it is highly unlikely that any lecturer at Tel-Aviv University will ever have the opportunity to engage in face-to-face relationships with all other members of the university—faculty, staff, and students. The university as a community, not an institution, thus would only be an image members carry in their minds. Would this criterion be sufficient to turn the university into an imagined community?

Consider an even more problematic example. I know all the members of my extended family, and I have had, at one point or another, intimate face-to-face contact with most of them. They are not, however, physically present in my room while I write this review. Some are at work or at school, some are traveling abroad, one new member I have yet to meet, and I have spoken only briefly with my cousin's new spouse. Hence, at this very moment, my view of my family as a whole depends on an image that exists in my mind. According to Anderson's definition then, my family is no less an imagined community than the nation I belong to.

Moreover, the image of my family as a whole has been formed not only through face-to-face encounters with its present members, but also through my awareness of the existence of former generations as well as future ones. It includes personal recollections of personal incidents related to the family, as well as collective memories of events I know of but have never experienced. Hence, even if all members of my family were now in the room with me, an account of this meeting would differ from the image of the family that lives in my mind.

If the condition for a community to be considered imagined is that the only way to perceive it as a whole is to refer to its image, then all social groups, even the smallest, are imagined communities. It is in this

sense that the term imagined community is uninformative. Anderson might accept this objection and argue that, even if all communities are imagined, they can still be distinguished by "the style in which they are imagined." He does not, however, supply evidence of the existence of such different styles, nor does he explain of what they may consist.

Anderson's claim could also be interpreted as referring not to the style in which communities are imagined but by the attributes that play a major role in the construction of the community's image. The differences among communities would then lie in the distinguishing features ascribed to them. For example, the image of a university embraces attributes such as classrooms, libraries, and a concern with academic studies, while the image of a family includes attributes such as love, intimacy, and ties of blood and marriage. In constructing the image of a nation, we refer to yet another set of attributes, which includes culture, language, history, and national consciousness, and which all its members share in common. But this argument amounts to saying no more than that communities are distinguished by their distinguishing characteristics, which is essentially a tautology.

This definition could be made more meaningful if substantial differences were pointed out in the nature of the distinguishing characteristics attributed to the different communities. For example, distinguishing features may be divided into those that are independent of the feelings and perceptions of the agents—age, gender, race, income, or place of birth—and those that are not. The characteristic features of groups that, for example, consist of all individuals born on July 4, or all who graduated Balliol College, Oxford, in the summer of 1986, or all Israeli citizens, belong to the first category. On the other hand, the characteristic features of a couple of lovers or group of friends belong to the second.[3] If we follow this categorization, it will become evident that a nation more closely resembles a group of friends than a group of citizens. Its existence cannot be deduced from certain objective features, but rather from the feelings of communion among its members, as well as from the existence of a shared national consciousness. Hence, an outside observer would not be able to divide the world accurately into nations, nor could he or she explain, without referring to the agents' feelings, why Ethiopian, Russian, and Israeli Jews belong to the same

[3] A group of friends can only be identified by the feelings shared among them. Some types of behavior might indeed indicate that some individuals are friends, but these individuals may only be pretending to be friends without really bearing affectionate feelings for one another. The opposite is also possible: individuals who feel friendly toward one another may agree to disguise their friendship. Hence, an external observer can never be sure that two individuals are friends unless he or she has a way to learn about their feelings.

nation, whereas Palestinian, Jordanian, and Syrian Arabs belong to different ones.

According to this interpretation, a community is defined as imagined not because of its size or because of the likelihood of face-to-face contact among its members. It is imagined because its existence is contingent on its members' sustaining a certain image of it that is based on their perceptions and feelings. If we adopt this interpretation we would, indeed, define a nation as an imagined community.

The term *imagined* inevitably raises questions. Are there communities which are not imagined? It might be the case that the difference among groups and communities lies exactly in the sphere of characteristic features, and consequently that all communities are, by definition, imagined. Are imagined communities less real than groups? A comprehensive discussion of the ontological status of communities is far beyond the scope of this review; however, one brief comment regarding the use of the term *real* in this context is necessary. If real is taken to mean "existing as a fact" then, as every realist in international relations will attest, the existence of imagined communities is a social fact. The term *imagined* communities is therefore not to be used synonymously with *imaginary* ones.

But should a nation be defined as an imaginary community when the images and feelings that hold the nation together draw on inventions? If the existence of an imagined community depends on the perceptions and feelings shared by members, then such a community can only be seen as imaginary if claims concerning its existence depend on a fallacious description of these feelings and perceptions. If, however, the members' image of their nation, as well as their collective consciousness, their memories, and their feelings of fraternity rest on mistaken or invented grounds, the community exists and is in no way imaginary.[4]

Since the existence of an imagined community depends on shared images and feelings, the community's boundaries are defined by the range of these attributes. Why does a person share communal feelings with some individuals rather than with others? In a case of friendship or love, the range of feelings may be determined by a set of personal characteristics: tastes, desires, preferences, affinities, and the like. But with nationhood, the process of demarcation is far more complicated.

[4] The feelings of individuals toward others may often rest in a misguided perception of social events or of the feelings of these particular others, and these misunderstandings may sometimes cause offense and personal grief. But these unfortunate results merely reflect the fact that these feelings, even though nurtured on erroneous grounds, are genuine.

The boundaries of national consciousness are not defined by personal attributes, and personal tastes are not a criterion of membership. How, then, do individuals define the boundaries of the nation they belong to? How do they construct its image?

The books reviewed here cite many examples showing that, in constructing an image of a nation, a large set of variables plays a role: religion, language, law, geographical isolation, economic considerations, bureaucratic decisions, colonial policies, and the like. Do images of nations created under radically different circumstances, and on the basis of different variables, share common features? This is an interesting question. If these images share no common ground, they perhaps should not be placed in the same category while, if they do, the definition of nation ought to emphasize this common denominator.

The paramount common denominator of all nations is a national consciousness fostering feelings of belongingness and national fraternity. This common denominator, rather than the specific conditions that led to its emergence, should thus be placed at the center of the definition of nation. Looking at the definition of another imagined community, that of friends, may help clarify this claim. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a friend as "one joined to another in intimacy and mutual benevolence." This definition does not mention the causes leading individuals to develop feelings of intimacy and mutual benevolence, and merely describes the outcome. Similarly, the reasons leading individuals to share feelings of fraternity and exclusivity and a belief in a common ancestry should not be part of the definition of nation. Both cases show that when the reasons for the emergence of feelings characteristic of these relationships are mistaken for the typical features themselves, an inadequate definition results.

A nation, argues Smith, is a "named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members" (p. 14). In this definition, Smith mixes together reasons for the emergence of a nation (a shared historic territory, a common economy, and a common legal system) with the results, (sharing a myth and historical memories).

These conditions can, but do not necessarily, give rise to national feelings. Individuals may share a territory and even historical memories without seeing themselves as members of the same nation, as is usually true for nations competing for the same piece of land. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict clearly shows that a shared territory and common historical memories can be divisive rather than unifying. Living

together in the same territory and under the same government, or even sharing economic and legal systems, may fail to blend different communities into one nation, as attested by the political reality in Canada, Belgium, the former Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. For every case in which one of these features led to the emergence of a nation, we could point to another where the same features were present but no nation emerged. Clearly then, the definition of nation cannot be contingent on these features but must depend only on their possible outcomes. Hence, a definition of nation *should not* specify the causes leading to the emergence of nations but should stress those features common to communities that fall under the definition of nation and distinguish them from other imagined communities.

A nation, then, may be defined as a community whose members share feelings of fraternity, substantial distinctiveness, and exclusivity, as well as beliefs in a common ancestry and a continuous genealogy. Members of such a community are aware not only that they share these feelings and beliefs but that they have an active interest in the preservation and well-being of their community. They thus seek to secure for themselves a public sphere where they can express their identity, practice their culture, and educate their young.

The first aspect of nationhood is that individuals see themselves affiliated with and committed to other members. But fraternity, unlike friendship, love, or political camaraderie, is not based on intimate relations, personal tastes, or a community of particular values.[5] It is grounded in a view of the nation as a community of common descent and fate. Members of such a community see themselves sharing a common destiny and view their individual success and well-being as closely dependent on the prosperity of the group as a whole. They relate their self-esteem and their accomplishments to the achievements of other group members and take pride in the group's distinctive contributions. Consequently, they develop feelings of caring and duty toward one another. These feelings are exclusive and apply to members only.

Yet feelings of fraternity may also be shared by women, homosexuals, vegetarians, Freemasons, members of a university, members of the kibbutz movement, or inhabitants of a local community, not one of which is commonly considered a nation. While these groups share

[5] Members of some nations may conceive of the uniqueness of their nation in terms of the values it fosters. The national culture will be seen as an expression of these values, the national history will be described as a struggle to ensure their protection and spread, and national education will be couched in their terms. Individuals who defy these values would seem to betray the nation—as the history of the term *non-American* testifies.

some features included in the definition of nation, they lack one or more of the other components of the definition. This indicates that each component of the definition is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of nationhood.

Women and homosexuals are not nations because their persistent historical presence is not a continuity of kinship, nor can it be, whereas national continuity embodies a strong sense of genealogy. Namely they can assure continuity of their group only by what might be called "intermarriage"—by producing children together with members of other groups who are of the opposite gender. Vegetarians and members of the kibbutz movement are not nations because both these groups uphold an ideology that they consider appropriate to the whole of humanity; their exclusivity is therefore contingent. National exclusivity, on the other hand, is categorical; the fact that the particular features of a group do not apply to the whole of humanity is not seen as either contingent or undesirable. National features are supposed to be restricted in scope and should not apply to nonmembers. Members of most nations do not believe that their culture, their language, or their traditions are appropriate to the whole of humanity.[6] In fact, they may view the restricted scope of national characteristics as a reason for pride rather than concern.

Freemasons or a university are not nations because their exclusivity is elitist and a function of individual attainments, whereas national exclusivity and fraternity are populistic and based on membership rather than achievement. Neither group believes that its members share a common ancestry.

The exclusion of local communities, to which all criteria of the definition of nation can be applied, is more complicated. A nation is a community whose members share feelings of distinctiveness and exclusivity, but a local community can also share these features. The French think that they share such features, but so do the Parisians. Why do Parisians not constitute a nation? Two answers are possible. First, Parisians will be part of the French nation for as long as they share with other members of that nation feelings of fraternity, a belief in a common ancestry, and a continuous genealogy. As long as such feelings persist, members of national subgroups will see themselves as members of the same nation. Second, their national identity will be French rather than Parisian as long as the former identity provides a

[6] In the era of colonialism some nations (mostly France but also England and Spain) did see their culture in missionary terms—as a good that had universal value and whose benefits should be extended to the rest of the world.

better, more informative description of their personal identity. This is the essence of national character, a concept much disliked at present, which assumes that those features characteristic of a nation—language, history, culture, religion, geography—are among the most substantive components of individual identity. If some feature of the local identity, say local dialect or culture, becomes a more substantial element of personal identity than the analogous national feature, national identity is endangered. If, for example, the Parisian dialect ever differs from other French dialects as much as it differs from Italian or Spanish, then such a divergence in language might encourage the development of a new, separate Parisian identity.

The last question is: Do states fall within the boundaries of my definition of nation? The answer is simple—they do not. Any definition of the concept *state* must refer to the institutional sphere and, in principle, need not allude at all to the feelings and beliefs of its members. States that appear to fit my definition of nation do so because they are nation-states, and what accords with my definition are the national rather than the state elements in the combination.[7]

In *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Greenfeld claims that the term nation has developed in a zigzag pattern. At each stage, the meaning of the term carries certain semantic baggage that evolves out of its usage in a particular situation. When circumstances change,

> aspects of the new situation, which were absent in the situation in which the conventional concept evolved, become cognitively associated with it, resulting in a duality of meaning. The meaning of the original concept is gradually obscured, and the new one emerges as conventional. When the word is used again in a new situation, it is likely to be used in this new meaning, as so on and so forth. (p. 5)

Greenfeld specifies nine stages in the development of the term *nation*. The term comes from the Latin word *natio*, meaning "something is born," and it is first used to refer to a group of foreigners. It then comes to indicate communities of students from geographically or linguistically related regions. Owing to the particular structure of university life in the Middle Ages, such communities functioned as support groups or unions, and their members developed common opinions and took the same side in scholastic debates. Nation thus acquired a new meaning, referring to a community of opinion and purpose. Since universities used to send representatives to adjudicate serious ecclesiastical

[7] I discuss the differences between the terms *state* and *nation* rather extensively in Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

debates in church councils, when the term entered its third stage it was applied to various parties in the "ecclesiastical republic." Spokespersons for these approaches were part of the religious elite, and nation thus came to be identified with "the representatives of cultural and political authority or a political, cultural and then social elite" (p. 5).

In England at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the term entered its fifth stage, in which it started to apply not only to the elite but also to the population at large, thus becoming synonymous with the word *people*. This semantic transformation, Greenfeld argues, signaled the emergence of the first nation, in the sense that we understand and use the term today, and launched the era of nationalism. The term then entered its next stage where it referred to the masses at large thus elevating them to the position of an elite. As it began to refer to the populace and the country, the term *nation* came to be understood as "a sovereign people." Finally, in the last two stages of its development, the term was associated first with other populations and countries, and then with a "unique sovereign people."

Greenfeld supports her analysis with a detailed and absorbing discussion of five test cases—England, France, Russia, Germany, and the United States. Nevertheless, I argue that her findings could be interpreted differently to show that, notwithstanding the vast social and political changes the world has undergone, the term *nation* has retained a stable, unchanging core meaning. Greenfeld's notion that the word *nation* first appears in reference to a group of foreigners implies that the origin of the word is closely related to the need to distinguish "us" (locals) from "them" (aliens). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *foreigner* means "alien to or from; dissimilar; introduced from the outside." In a world where all individuals are similar and insiders, terms like foreigner and nation may thus be useless. From its inception, then, the term *nation* was used to distinguish between distinct and finite groups.

Hence, it is not surprising that, at the second stage, nation distinguished among communities of students coming from distinct geographic and linguistic regions. Had all the students come from the same area, or had there been no significant differences among individuals from these various regions, this distinction would have been pointless. In the next two stages, the term is first identified with a community of opinion and then with the representatives of a cultural or political group. Nation thus became identified with an elite—not with a general, unidentified elite, but with that of a particular community.

The next step was almost obvious: the term *nation* turned from a

definition of the delegates of a specific group into a definition of the group itself. The fact that such disparate groups established nation-states of their own—first in England and France and then in the rest of Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia—created a close link among modern states and nations. The term thus came to be applied to every unique people, as well as to states whose political culture and institutions reflected the distinctive characteristics of these groups.[8]

A comparison between the first stage, when nation applied to a unique group of foreigners, and the last stage, when it applies to a unique people, shows that its meaning is surprisingly stable. Thus the various stages of the term's development differ in the application of the term, not in its content: whereas in the first stage nation is used by insiders to define outsiders, in the last one it is used by a community to define itself as well as others. These changes in application could be ascribed to the fact that, under conditions of restricted mobility, less awareness of the existence of other communities might be expected, and a term such as nation could thus seem superfluous. Immigration and travel bring home the awareness of other communities, shedding new light on the identity of individuals, who come to see themselves as members of a particular community. In a world characterized by the free flow of information and by massive waves of immigration, all groups are forced to recognize their own particularity.

The mid-twentieth century marks the emergence of yet another stage of the term's evolution, in which national groups begin to recognize their own inner diversity. Hyphenated designations, such as African-Americans or Italian-Americans, emerge for the purpose of differentiating these groups from one another. At present, the dominant group of white Protestants does not need a name to distinguish itself from other groups who may be viewed as exceptions (namely, foreigners), and need particular names. An increasing use of the term *white-Americans* would clearly indicate that this group sees itself as having the same status as every other, and that we no longer have rules, only exceptions.

We can thus conclude that all along the zigzag path sketched by Greenfeld the term has retained a core meaning—that of an exclusive and limited community whose members share some unique, defining characteristics, and are connected by feelings of fraternity. Hence, Greenfeld's claim that "a nation coextensive with humanity is in no

[8] For an analysis of the sources of confusion between *nation* and *state* see Yael Tamir, "The Right to National Self-Determination," *Social Research* 58, no. 3 (1991).

way a contradiction in terms" is, in light of her own data, unfounded (p. 7). No nation, argues Anderson, "imagines itself continuous with mankind," and all nations see themselves as having some distinctive features (p. 7). Inherent in nationalism is a recognition of the existence of others. It is the way in which the national group treats these others that distinguishes polycentric nationalism, which respects the other and sees each nation as enriching a common civilization, from ethnocentric nationalism, which sees one's own nation as superior to all others and seeks domination.[9]

The definition of nation I suggest fits all the stages described by Greenfeld, as well as all the groups Anderson and Smith identify as nations. It points to the heart of the national experience—the presence of shared feelings and perceptions, and a shared desire to collectively protect and foster the national identity—and is independent of contingent reasons fostering the emergence of particular nations. Furthermore, this definition touches the source of nationalism's exceptional power—the view of the nation as a continuous community that influences one's perception of oneself, as well as of one's past and future.

The Power of Nationalism

The definition of nation I have been considering suggests that nationalism plays a central role in the shaping of individual consciousness, beliefs, and self-perception. But is national identity more significant than other types of social identity? Liberalism and socialism invite individuals to see themselves as part of humanity at large; Marxism tells them that class membership should overshadow all others; feminism urges them to give priority to gender-based identity; while nationalism encourages them to see themselves as contextualized, as members of a particular continuous community. Is this self-image more appealing than all others? In an attempt to answer this question, Smith's *National Identity* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of nationalism.

The power of nationalism, argues Smith, should be attributed to the fact that membership in a nation provides "a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture" (p. 17). Although his statement captures the importance of national identity, it does not

[9] Note that even the term *ethnocentric*—putting one's ethnic group at the center—implies an acknowledgment that other groups exist on the periphery.

support the claim that this is the most important collective identity. To do so, Smith would have to point out the advantages of a national identity over all others. Gender identity is as entangled in our self-image as national membership, class solidarity influences our self-perception no less than national fraternity, and cultural and regional affiliations are often as distinctive as national ones. All these identities are characterized by particular attributes that distinguish members from outsiders and allow individuals to locate themselves within a defined collective context. Why are the identities they generate less effective than national identity? In an attempt to explain the supremacy of national identity, Smith points out the qualities that make it the best candidate for providing individuals a place in the world, enabling them to contend with the changes and uncertainties characteristic of modern existence. His argument, however, is not entirely convincing and leaves several questions unanswered.

National identity is more powerful than gender, Smith argues, because members of the same gender are geographically separated, divided by class, and ethnically fragmented. They must therefore "ally themselves to other, more cohesive identities, if they are to inspire collective consciousness and action" (p. 10). This argument, however, can easily be reversed: members of the same nation may be geographically concentrated, but they are scattered in different regions, divided by class and gender, and, at times, also by religion, race, and even language. Hence, it is not clear why national identity, unlike gender, need not ally with other identities when attempting to inspire collective consciousness and action.

Local or regional identities, argues Smith, cannot compete with national identity because they are not stable. "Regions can easily fragment into localities, and localities may easily disintegrate into separate segments" (p. 10). But Smith's own studies, as well as many other recent works on nationalism, demonstrate that national identities can also be unstable. In fact, in the last century, many individuals changed their national identity at least twice while living in the same geographical region—from Lombardians to Italians, from Walloons to Belgians, from Latvians, Ukrainians, and Uzbeks to Soviet citizens, from Serbs and Croatians to Yugoslavians, and then back to their original identity. On what grounds can we claim that, as a rule, local affiliations are less effective than national ones in promoting a stable identity? Moreover, larger regional identities—European, Asian, African, American—are clearly more stable than both national and local identities. So, why should they be less important than national ones?

Smith also considers class identity ineffective because economic factors fluctuate rapidly over time, thus limiting the chances of preserving different economic groups within a class-based community. Moreover, given its limited emotional impact and its cultural shallowness, class identity seems to Smith an inadequate basis for an enduring collective identity. Although it seems true that in modern, mobile societies, class identity may be less stable than national identity, we can still wonder whether, for instance, proletarians belonging to different nations share more interests than members of different classes who belong to the same nation. If they do, why should they subordinate the interests they share with members of the working class to the interests they share with members of their own nation who are now exploiting them?

Smith's answer again alludes to the continuous, stable nature of the national group. National identity, he argues, is more meaningful than all other identities because it is more stable. Note, however, that the term *stable* might be slightly confusing, as it fails to capture the emotional dimension embedded in notions such as continuity, common descent, and shared destiny.

Anderson also attributes the strength of nationalism to the perception of the nation as a community of shared fate. Dying for one's nation, he argues, assumes a moral grandeur that dying for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association, or even Amnesty International cannot rival. Unlike the nation, "these are all bodies one can join or leave at easy will" (p. 144).[10]

Membership in a nation, unlike membership in a gender, class, or region, thus enables an individual to find a place not only in the world in which he or she lives, but also in an uninterrupted chain of being. Nationhood promotes fraternity both among fellow members and across generations. It endows human action with a meaning that endures over time, thus carrying a promise of immortality. These features are desperately needed in an ever-changing, urban, technological age. In this sense, I would argue, nationalism is not the pathology of the modern age but an answer to its malaise—to the neurosis, alienation, and meaninglessness characteristic of modern times. The power of nationalism can thus be attributed to the following four features, all of which are variations on one theme, namely, transgenerational, genealogical continuity.

[10] I accept Anderson's claim that it is the perception of the nation as a community of fate that generates the readiness to die for one's country. I contest, however, his claim that voluntary associations cannot muster this type of devotion. For a more detailed analysis of this issue, see Yael Tamir, "Reflections on Patriotism," in E. Staub, ed., *Patriotism: Its Role and Manifestations in Individual and Group Life* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1995).

1. *Membership in a nation promises individuals redemption from personal oblivion.* In a secular era, Smith argues, identification with the nation is "the surest way to surmount the finality of death and ensure a measure of personal immortality" (p. 160). Anderson makes a similar point when he argues that the effectiveness of nationalism stems from its transcendence of contingency, shifting finite human actions to the realm of the eternal.

As long as the nation endures, it will show gratitude to all who struggle and sacrifice their lives for its survival. It will turn them into heroes, perhaps canonize them, even if they come from vile or ignoble background. In this sense nationalism is an egalitarian ideology, as is best illustrated by the uniformity of military cemeteries, where rich and poor, educated and illiterate, all lie below identical tombstones in a paragon of equality and fraternity.

King Henry's famous speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V* conveys this notion well. On the verge of their almost certain death in a battle fought on Saint Crispin's day, King Henry promises his men immortality. Even the base and evil among them are offered a path to redemption, a chance to attain glory by entering the national pantheon.

> . . . Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
> From this day to the ending of the world,
> But we in it shall be remembered;
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
> (*Henry V*, act 4, scene 3)

This promise is only meaningful because King Henry and his men are convinced that England will go on until "the ending of the world," or else the memory of this glorious battle, and with it the promise of immortality, would surely wither away.

2. *Identification with a nation gives individuals hope of personal renewal through national regeneration.* The notion of national identity clearly shows that the personal status and self-esteem of individuals reflect the condition of their nation. When a nation is in decay, its members' pride suffers with it, and when it flourishes, they prosper too. This is a central theme in Rousseau's *Address to the Polish Nation* (1772) and in Johann Fichte's *Address to the German Nation* (1807), as in many other nationalist texts.

National indignation was the prevalent mood when Fichte delivered his address. The Germans, he argued, could persist in their destructive search for self-satisfaction and thereby continue to suffer deprivation, humiliation, the scorn of their conqueror, and the evil of serfdom; or they could bestir themselves and strive to regain Germany's unity and

honor. This was their duty to their ancestors as well as to their future generations.

> There comes a solemn appeal to you from your descendants yet unborn. "You boast of your forefathers," they cry to you, "and link yourselves with pride to a noble line. Take care that the chain does not break off with you; see to it that we, too, may boast of you and use you as an unsullied link to connect ourselves with the same illustrious line."[11]

Although this generation is now abased, argues Fichte, it can live to see the German name reestablish itself as "the most glorious among all people," and the German nation as the "regenerator and re-creator of the world."[12] By presenting the dim and desperate present as only one link in a long chain of events, as a transient phase along a triumphant path, Fichte offers his contemporaries the prospect of hope and pride. All the despair and humiliation, as well as all the hope and glory enfolded in the nationalist experience, are expressed in these words. Hence the continuous existence of the nation provides individuals with a glorious past they can admire and a no less glorious future they can aspire to share. Pride in the past and hope for the future give them power to cope with their present humiliation and fight for the nation's redemption.

3. *Membership in a nation offers rescue from alienation, solitude, and anonymity.* By fostering the ideal of fraternity, nationalism grants individuals the feeling that they are not alone, that they are cared for, and no less significantly, that they have someone to care for. This caring is not based on personal liking or achievements but on membership, on the fact that we are all a part, an organic part, of a natural social entity that has no beginning or end. Membership in a nation is seen as a partnership transcending the life span of individuals, thus promising the members of each generation that their descendants will care for them as they, in turn, cared for their forefathers.

4. *National membership assures individuals that, qua members, they enjoy equal status.* Greenfeld rightly argues that, when the term *nation* came to refer to the populace at large rather than to the elite only, it allowed each member of the people to feel that he or she partook of a superior elite quality. Nationhood thus had an elevating effect that membership in a gender or class could not have. Consequently, Greenfeld argues, class and status differences became superficial, and the stratified national populace was perceived as essentially homogeneous.

[11] Fichte, *Address to the German Nation* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 226–28.
[12] Ibid., 215.

Greenfeld goes on to state that the allocation of sovereignty to the people and the recognition that various social strata are, fundamentally, political equals are basic tenets of both nationalism and democracy. Democracy was thus

> born with the sense of nationality, the two are inherently linked, and neither can be fully understood apart from this connection. Nationalism was the form in which democracy appeared in the world, contained in the idea of the nation as a butterfly in a cocoon. (p. 10)

This claim, however, is somewhat misleading. The equality that membership in a nation accords is not a democratic one. Nationhood grants individuals a feeling of belonging and a sense of mutuality, but it does not eliminate divisions of class, gender, and status, and in this sense, it is similar to membership in a family. Belonging to a family grants all members equal standing qua members, but most families remain hierarchical, as attested by the term *heads of families* (applied to agents as different as philosophers and revenue officers). Children, young adults, the elderly, and often women all have a different status. Although all are equal members, this equality, unfortunately, is not translated either conceptually or practically into other aspects of family life. Greenfeld thus moves far too quickly from national to liberal democratic beliefs. Moreover, she overlooks the fact that the conviction regarding the equality of all human beings rests, first and foremost, on a religious rather than a national set of beliefs.

This is evident from Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1690), which establishes the equality of man on the following grounds:

> The state of Nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possession; for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order and about His business; they are His property, whose workmanship they are made to last during His, not one another's pleasure.[13]

Surely, these are not nationalist beliefs.

A more accurate and less sentimental description of the relations among nationalism and democracy is provided by Niran, who claims that the arrival of nationalism, in a distinctively modern sense, was tied to the political baptism of the lower classes.

[13] John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1690; reprint, London: Prometheus Books, 1986), 9–10.

> Although sometimes hostile to democracy, nationalist movements have been invariably populist in outlook and sought to induce lower classes into political life. In its most typical version, this assumed the shape of restless middle-class and intellectual leadership trying to set up and channel popular class energies into support for the new states.[14]

Nationalism may be part and parcel of the humanist tradition, but I see no virtue in equating or conflating it with a democratic or liberal set of principles. Although I would be the last to claim that a liberal democratic version of nationalism is not possible, turning it into the only possible version seems both inaccurate and misleading.

The kind of equality that nationalism grants fellow nationals is not necessarily political but communal. Long after the birth of English nationalism, which Greenfeld dates to the mid-sixteenth century, English philosophers such as Locke and Mill did not believe that the metaphysical equality of men, or their equal standing as fellow nationals, ought to carry egalitarian political implications, namely, that every human being should have equal political rights. If nationalism was necessary for the development of democracy, it was not because it established political equality but because it gave a rationale for the division of the world into distinct political units in which democratic principles could be implemented.

Greenfeld's tendency to conflate democracy and nationalism results from confusing the subtle differences between nationalist values and national values, that is, between values fundamental to a nationalist way of thinking and values shared by members of a nation. The belief in liberal democratic values may be constitutive of the national culture of some nations—of the English and American national cultures, for example—yet these values are not nationalist values in that they are not inherent to the national way of thinking.

Greenfeld's significant contribution is not the joining of nationalism and democracy, but rather her sensitivity to the potential of nationhood to elevate every member of the community that it made sovereign. Her claim goes to the heart of the nationalist phenomenon and points to the origins of its power. She rightly argues that national identity is fundamentally "a matter of dignity. It gives people reason to be proud" (p. 487).

The belief that a nation is chosen and its land is holy strengthens this sense of national dignity. Not surprisingly, then, nationalists from all the following nations explicitly refer to their people as chosen and

[14] T. Niran, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: NLB, 1977), 41. Note that Anderson questions the universal validity of Niran's claims (pp. 47–49).

to their land as the promised one: Egypt, England, France, Germany, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and, especially and insistently, the United States, where this theme was taken up by both whites and blacks.[15] The tendency to sanctify one's nation alludes to the kind of dignity that national membership bestows upon its members, one that aspires to transcend human action and voluntary social contracts and move on to the transcendental realm.

England's domination of eighteenth-century Europe and the West's influence in the world as a whole "made nationality the canon. . . . Societies belonging or seeking entry to the supra-societal system of which the West was the centre had in fact no choice but to become nations" (p. 14). Every group of individuals thus had to organize within a national framework, namely, to present itself as a continuous community with a glorious past and a no less promising future. Anderson offers many examples of these efforts. One of the most interesting is that of President Sukarno, who spoke with complete sincerity of the 350 years of colonialism that "his 'Indonesia' had endured, despite the fact that the very concept of 'Indonesia' is a twentieth century invention" (p. 11). To reinforce the notion of the antiquity of his nation, Sukarno adopted the nineteenth-century Javanese Prince Diponegoro as a national hero, as the liberator of Java. The prince himself, however, as his memoirs show, had no intention of liberating the land or expelling the Dutch; indeed, he had no concept of the Dutch as a collectivity but wanted to conquer Java and rule over it.

The nationalists' proclivity to invent a past for their nations attests to the importance of the notion of continuity for our understanding of nationalism's power. Indeed, the proliferation of nationalism can be explained by reference to other factors, especially to the functional role it has played in the emergence of the modern state: it allowed the mobilization of the masses, justified general conscription, taxation, and education. Nationalism created markets that allowed print-capitalism to flourish and provided status and opportunities for the intelligentsia. These functional roles, however, assume a parasitic relationship to the role played by nationalism at the personal level. Nationalism acquired its mobilizing power and could play a functional role in modern politics only because individuals internalized the view of the nation as a special community exhibiting historical continuity and a collective destiny, as a source of personal and collective pride, and as a shelter of

[15] Conor C. O'Brien, "Nationalist and Democrats," *Times Literary Supplement* (August 15, 1991), 29.

care and support in an alienating modern and secular world.

The books reviewed here point to the contrast between the antiquity and continuity of nations in the eyes of nationalists and their evident modernity and instability in the eyes of sociologists and historians. It is truly ironic that the power of nationalism depends precisely on those aspects of the nation's image least supported by research evidence.

The Truth-Content of National Beliefs

Nationalists tend to create their own narratives to interpret historical events in ways that fit their needs, to renew languages artificially, to mimic other nations, and to appropriate foreign traditions as their own. Motivated by a desire to connect their nation to a remote and illustrious past, nationalists do not hesitate, whenever necessary, to invent such links. Modern Iraq thus claims to find its roots in Babylon, Egyptians see the pharaohs as their genealogical forefathers, Greeks trace a direct line to Hellenic culture, and Mexicans point to their link with the Aztecs. Although the accuracy of these claims is often questionable, their functional role remains intact. Nationalists have long understood, Smith argues, that the criterion of national dignity "is the felt antiquity of a community's ethno-history, *irrespective of its truth-content*" (p. 161). This is the bar at which they must make their appeal for national assertion.

> The truth-content of unearthed memories is less important culturally and politically than their abundance, variety and drama (their aesthetic qualities) or their example of loyalty, nobility and self-sacrifice (their moral qualities) that inspire emulation and bind the present generation to the "glorious dead." (p. 164)

Smith is not the first to argue that truth is of minor importance in national claims. In his famous essay "What Is a Nation?" Ernest Renan claims that a nation is a group of individuals who cherish and retain their shared history but remember it selectively, ready to forget some of its less pleasant episodes.[16] Hence, French citizens should forget "la Saint-Barthelemy" or "les massacres du Midi au XIIIième siècle." As Anderson rightly notes, Renan sees no need to describe these episodes in French history assuming that his readers remember what they ought to have forgotten. Why this conscious attempt first to remember and then to forget these events? They ought to be remembered because

[16] See Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce que c'est q'une nation?" in *Oeuvres complets* (Paris: Colmann Lévy, 1947).

these religious conflicts were important turning points, and ought to be forgotten because these were wars among fellow Frenchmen. As Anderson reminds us, this attitude is not typically French in any way. The American educational system encourages a view of the 1861–65 armed conflict between the Union and the Confederate States as a civil war within one state and not between, "as they briefly were, two sovereign states" (p. 201). Similarly, English-history textbooks intentionally obscure the answer to the disquieting question what or whom did William the Conqueror conquer?

> The only intelligible modern answer would be "Conqueror of the English," which would turn the old Norman predator into a more successful precursor of Napoleon and Hitler. Hence "the Conqueror" operates as the same kind of ellipsis as "la Saint Barthelemy" to remind one of something which one is immediately obligated to forget. Norman William and Saxon Harold thus meet on the battlefield of Hastings, if not as dancing partners, at least as brothers. (p. 201)

Deliberate forgetfulness and misrepresentation of historical facts thus seem to constitute an important, and perhaps indispensable, feature of nation building. Nevertheless, although Anderson and Smith offer ample evidence of the fact that national identity is often based on false or, worse still, intentionally misleading beliefs, they do not discuss the implications of these findings.

One of the very few references to this issue is found in an essay by David Miller who explores the relationship between the truth of national beliefs and the nature of national obligations. He does agree with Smith and Anderson that the existence of a nation depends on "whether its members have the right beliefs; it is not part of the definition that the beliefs should in fact be true."[17] For individuals to be able to cultivate national feelings, it is important that the story the nation tells itself about its past should be generally believed, but it need not be historically accurate.

But why must national feelings rely on the nation's felt antiquity or continuity? Why do nationalists find such difficulty in conceding that "those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us," and force themselves to invent for their nation a history even at the cost of self-deception?[18]

Communities are no less valuable because they are a human creation whose endurance cannot be guaranteed. The desire for guarantees that our community is eternal and secure in some objective haven may be

[17] Miller, "The Ethical Significance of Nationalism," *Ethics* 98 (1988), 648.
[18] L. Hutcheson, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2.

no more than a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past. Paraphrasing the closing sentences of "Two Concepts of Liberty," one may argue that to realize the contingency of one's community and yet stand for it unflinchingly is what distinguishes civilized people from barbarians: "To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity."[19]

A more self-conscious type of nationalism will be less riddled with inconsistencies and dilemmas and is therefore warranted. But will this type of nationalism be able to play the same social role filled by its predecessor? The answer to this question, as yet undisclosed, goes to the heart of the national experience.

[19] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 172.